OPINION

BY AROOJ WAHEED DAR

Power games

WHILE it was encouraging to see a post by a minister on the importance of local governments, it raised a pertinent question: who really wants LGs? Or perhaps, who doesn't? The public? Local representatives? Bureaucracy? Politicians? Or the military? The answer lies in identifying who stands to lose from genuine devolution.

Despite lofty rhetoric about grassroots democracy, support for empowered LGs has been largely symbolic. The weak implementation of Article 140A tells the story. Perhaps, Pakistan's power elite has never quite recovered from the memory of Musharraf's era, when LGs briefly showed what decentralisation could look like.

The fear is simple: if LGs are empowered, the grip over resources weakens; money and authority would flow downward, making it harder for powerbrokers to manipulate governance. Hence, LGs have been systematically disempowered by the 'powers that be' through a mix of de jure and de facto strategies — hardly creative, yet brutally effective.

Chief amongst these tactics are frequent amendments to the LG Act, largely tailored to suit the incumbent government. Arguably, no single law has undergone as many changes, with each revision resulting in the immediate dissolution of existing LG structures. These amendments repeatedly revise mandates, sometimes localising authority, only to later re-provincialise it. In several instances, powers have been shifted from local representatives to bureaucrats, undermining service delivery and eroding local authority.

Another common ploy is the establishment of parallel bodies at provincial level that encroach upon the mandate of LGs. Instead of strengthening the capacity of existing local authorities, functions such as sanitation, water supply, urban management, etc, are provincialised (at no less cost), under the pretext of inefficiency. Examples include services managed by the LWMC, SSWMB, WASA, PHA, LDA, KDA, and so on. Such arrangements keep political visibility and control with provincial governments, sidelining local representatives altogether.

Other parallel bodies have also been created at the provincial level that deprive LGs of critical finances such as revenue from cattle markets, parking fees and property-related fees. Agencies like the PRA, SRB, KPRA and BRA have taken over these streams, tightening provincial control over resources. While existing revenues are curtailed, financial dependency is further entrenched through procedural hurdles and the requirement of bureaucratic approvals in the introduction of new revenue streams.

The most ironic is the establishment of LG&CD departments at provincial levels. These departments, contrary to their names, are extensions of provincial government staffed by bureaucrats. Funds directed through these departments must navigate lengthy chains of command, rarely trickling down to local levels. Perhaps the most unimaginative tactic is the deliberate delay in LG elections. Political parties try to postpone elections until they are confident that their preferred candidates have a strong chance of winning, reducing local bodies to mere subservience. Control is further solidified through HR using two key strategies: ensuring all hiring is done at the provincial level and that no hiring is done at the local level. In this way, all important seats are designated to politically well-connected people, preserving the status quo.

By using these tactics, an equilibrium of sorts has been reached — 'you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours'. In the context of LGs, the most significant is the nexus between the deputy commissioner and the MPA: MPAs use de facto powers to secure funds for schemes that are transferred to DCs. DCs get more financial authority, making them powerful in the local context; and MPAs get greater influence on how funds will be spent, allowing them to strengthen their vote bank. The end game is control! Why negotiate with elected mayors when you can command compliance through bureaucratic reshuffles?

> LGs have been systematically disempowered.

But here's the irony — in this obsession over control, powerholders ignore the one strategy that could actually strengthen their legitimacy: investing in human capital and public service delivery. If service delivery improves, so does goodwill, and if goodwill grows, so does the vote bank. Yet short-term gains trump long-term reform. In this scenario, empowered LGs seem unlikely soon. The entire status quo would have to be dismantled, and many powerholders would have to relinquish control.

Although one idea does come to mind: maybe, the chief secretary — usually more powerful than the chief minister — can simply put stricter enforcement of Article 140A on the assembly's agenda. As simple as that. ■

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BY MAHIR ALI

More Zo, please

AMONG Zohran Mamdani's many charming characteristics is his remarkable capacity to keep his head while others are losing theirs and blaming it on him. The remainder of Rudyard Kipling's *If* also applies, notably the bits about not dealing in lies while being lied about, and not giving way to hating while being hated.

There was no dearth of liars and haters between his two remarkable triumphs this year, first in the Democratic Party primary and then in last week's election as mayor of New York City. Inevitably, the leading culprit was Donald Trump, who transgressed the bounds of common sense and decency in repeatedly denigrating Mamdani as a 'communist lunatic'. Many of the US president's more irresponsible MAGA acolytes went even further, indicating that Mamdani's NYC would resemble 'Pyongyang plus Sharia'.

The panic revolves around proposals — rent freezes and taxing the very rich to pay for 'luxuries' such as free childcare and buses, alongside access to cheaper groceries across the city's five boroughs — that are not considered radical in many European cities. Dutch environmentalist Alexander Verbeek overheard someone saying in an Oslo cafe that at last a 'normal' politician had emerged in the US, adding: "Here, taking care of one another through public programmes isn't radical socialism. It's Tuesday."

It could be argued that Europe, too, is increasingly on the blink as far as social welfare is concerned, and appears to be headed down the Trumpian path where immigration and racism are concerned. Much of it, though, remains less unequal than the US in most respects, and the kind of proposals put forward by Mamdani tend not to be automatically slammed as a communist conspiracy.

Sure, the old social democracy has been on the wane right across the West for three decades now, but the far right is on the ascendant precisely because the alternative almost everywhere is a neoliberal status quo, regardless of how the largely indistinguishable alternatives describe themselves. Britain's Labour Party is a case in point, which helps to explain why Zack Polanski, the newly emerged Greens leader, is enthused by Mamdani's success.

By and large, the Democrats in the US are an excellent example of a purportedly progressive party disinclined to challenge the monstrous consequences of its own policies, yet willing to march into combat against any of its foot soldiers who comes up with credible and popular ideas that challenge the nastiest aspects of American capitalism. Discombobulated as it was by the charismatic appeal and vast outreach that took Mamdani from an inconsequential contender to the clear winner of the summer's Democratic primary, the party leadership initially refused to endorse him. State governor Kathy Hochul and House of Representatives minority leader Hakeem Jeffries eventually extended reluctant support, but Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer could not bring himself to make even that empty gesture.

Bill Clinton early on endorsed Andrew Cuomo, who had resigned in disgrace as NY governor after accusations of sexual harassment, while Barack Obama reached out to Mamdani when the latter was on the cusp of victory and offered to serve as a 'sounding board'. Mamdani was probably too polite to tell Obama that he never lived up to the promises of his inspiring campaign and thus paved the way for Trump, but one would like to think he is too intelligent to take any advice from his detractors within or outside the Democrats, some of whom have been seeking influence after donating heavily to thwart his candidacy.

> There's a beacon of hope in New York.

It would be wise of the Democrats to emulate Mamdani's incredible path to victory — by focusing on affordability, embracing diversity and vowing to obstruct the Trump administration's fascist agenda — but wisdom is not their forte. If the Democrats do indeed stage a comeback in next year's midterm elections, it will be because of activists inspired by the path outlined by Mamdani and the 100,000 volunteers who canvassed on his behalf. They should note also how Mamdani triumphed in the face of a Zionist backlash in a city that hosts the second largest population (after Tel Aviv) of Jews, around one-third of whom voted for Mamdani. The remainder mostly opted for an accused sex offender who backed a genocidal state.

Across all of NYC's multifarious communities, young people voted overwhelmingly for Mamdani. They obviously represent the future — much like Gen Z spearheaded revolts in nations from Nepal to Peru and Madagascar. The consequences are often depressing, not least where the military takes control and doesn't let go. We are all too familiar with that phenomenon. No one can say how well Mamdani will do as mayor of the citadel of capitalism, but it would be premature to relinquish the hope that he represents the crack where the light gets in. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Ties with BD

LAHORE: Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto has expressed the hope that diplomatic relations will be established between Pakistan and Bangladesh before the end of the year... . About the recent changes in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Bhutto ... pointed out that Pakistan strictly adhered to the policy of non-interference and considered the change in Bangladesh as an internal affair of that country. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from the UN,] the General Assembly ... stamped its approval on the resolution equating Zionism with racism after a bitter debate in which the Israeli ambassador tore up the resolution. The vote was greeted with loud applause. The resolution was adopted by a vote of 72 in favour (including Pakistan) to 35 against, with 32 abstentions. Earlier, Western manoeuvres to postpone the vote and gain priority for other resolution on "elimination of all forms of racial discrimination" were ... defeated. In Beirut, a spokesman for the ... PLO today [Nov 11] said "the resolution is considered a new victory of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people in their struggle".

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Parallel government

RAXAUL: At nine points in "the soft underbelly" of Nepal, Nepali Congress volunteer forces were today [Nov 11] making a simultaneous assault aimed at the overthrow of the Rana regime in this ... Himalayan Kingdom, reports the [Press Trust of India]. Simultaneously, the self-exiled King of Nepal, Tribhuvana Bir Bikram Shah Deva, came to Bharat's Capital, having been flown in a Bharati Air Force Dakota from his Capital, where for the past five days he had taken refuge in the Bharati Embassy in a conflict with his Prime Minister, the virtual Ruler of the Kingdom.

Wilfred Lazarus, PTI staff correspondent in the Bharat-Nepali border town of Raxaul ... reported that Birganj, hardly five miles inside Nepal, was already in the hands of Nepali Congress forces after a short but sharp fight with the Nepali Government troops stationed in this second largest town of the mountain kingdom. These insurrectionary forces, the correspondent reported, had set up a "parallel Government".

[Meanwhile, according to our Khairpur correspondent,] Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan today [Nov 11] inaugurated the Khairpur State Majlis, the first Assembly elected on the basis of adult franchise in Pakistan-Bharat sub-continent.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Diabetics deserve workplace equity

THE World Diabetes Day, which is being commemorated on Nov 14, is an opportunity to raise awareness about the global public health issue, and to see what really needs to be done both collectively and individually for better prevention, diagnosis and management of the medical condition.

The latest global figures released by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) show that more than 589 million people are living with diabetes. In Pakistan, an estimated 34.53 million people live with the condition. More critically, 29 per cent of them are undiagnosed. In 2024, diabetes caused as many as 226,752 deaths and cost the national healthcare system a whopping $2.73 billion.

The theme of the World Diabetes Day this year is 'Diabetes and the Workplace'. Around the world, seven in 10 people living with diabetes are of working age; meaning 20-65 years old. Many face daily challenges managing their condition in the workplace. They may experience discrimination, which results in lack of support and discomfort when attending to their medical needs at the workplace. Some avoid disclosing their condition out of fear of being treated differently, or not receiving the same professional opportunities as their colleagues. These challenges have a negative impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. Immediate action is required to ensure that people living with diabetes receive support to thrive at work.

The Global Diabetes Compact (GDC) of the World Health Organisation (WHO) truly has the potential to improve the wellbeing at work of people living with diabetes by supporting national efforts to achieve universal health coverage, strengthening health systems through primary care, reducing modifiable risk factors and tackling diabetes-related stigma. The complementary global diabetes coverage targets further support wellbeing by promoting access to medicines and care for people of working age and beyond.

It is time for the government to allocate sufficient resources to improve access to diagnostic and everyday care facilities across Pakistan, and to accelerate the pace of progress towards the implementation of the WHO's GDC initiative.

Dr Ashraf Ali Jafrani
Sujawal

Tempting promises

JIHAD carries deep moral meaning — inner reform, social justice and, in rare cases, defence. Yet, it is often exploited. Political actors and opportunists wrap worldly aims in sacred language, and misguide vulnerable, desperate, innocent and ignorant people. Many people join violent outfits out of desperation. Poverty, humiliation, illness and isolation make the promise of relief in the hereafter tempting. Recruiters offer a simple bargain: take up arms, end suffering, and a sacred reward awaits. For someone crushed by life's pressures, it feels like escape, not duty.

Defending others is a noble act, but fleeing hardship under holy language is manipulation. Worse, some movements are created for political purposes. Temporary fronts are used to mobilise support through sincere and well-meaning recruits who are later discarded or even labelled terrorists once their purpose is served, leaving behind ruined lives.

The solution lies in three simple steps: teach, include and scrutinise. The first one means to explain sacred terms and moral reasoning, not slogans. The second one refers to providing economic opportunities, mental health and civic support. Finally, the last one means to expose all sorts of manipulative rhetoric, and enforce laws based on actions, not words.

Imran Rafi
Karachi

Alienated community

THIS is with reference to the report "Transgender community decries 'police-led evictions' in KP" (Oct 15). Such incidents reflect a decline in social compassion and a rise in discrimination, religious intolerance and moral decay. The state's apparent helplessness, or at times even complicity, further deepens the suffering of this already vulnerable group.

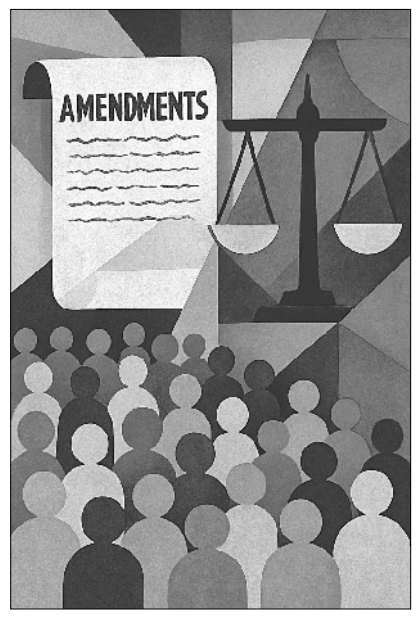
In Pakistan, transgender individuals face issues like systemic exclusion, transphobia and violence that practically affect nearly every aspect of their lives.

The problem often begins at home as many are disowned by their own families. They seek refuge in communal homes that isolates them further from society. This alienation also creates bureaucratic hurdles. Many transgender individuals struggle to acquire CNICs, and are thus excluded from welfare programmes and social protection mechanisms. Without legal recognition and stable income, they remain exposed to daily harassment, extortion and violence.

Globally, the treatment of transgender people varies widely, even within religious contexts. Countries like Iran legally recognise transgender identities, while others continue to suppress them. This shows that prejudice arises from cultural and political misuse of religion. The plight of the transgender community in Pakistan underscores the urgent need for social awareness, legal reforms and genuine empathy. The government must work directly with transgender representatives to ensure fair policies for one and all.

Habib Hyder Laghari
Edmonton, Canada

A matter of priorities



HAD there been some global competition related to speedy lawmaking, Pakistan might well have earned some sort of a record by now. But there is none, and there is a reason why no such contest exists anywhere in the world. Simply put, speed tends to compromise legislative efficiency. In a theatre of haste, every procedural pause becomes a potential inconvenience, and every voice of caution is taken as a minor irritation to those pushing for a constitutional amendment. The political choreography we are witnessing today is no different.

The amazing speed at which the whole thing has unfolded has given civil society, legal experts and the citizens little time to digest or debate the proposals. Speed in governance is necessary only when balanced with scrutiny, transparency and accountability — qualities that have historically been in short supply.

At the heart of our tendency to rush lies an uncomfortable truth: while the legislature and ruling coalition wrestle in parliament, millions of Pakistanis continue to grapple with poverty, joblessness, a fragile economy, worsening air pollution, failing public institutions, and diseases.

According to World Bank reports, the poverty rate is surging again in Pakistan, with nearly one-in-three households getting tipped into the zone of vulnerability, reversing relative progress made over the last few years. Unemployment remains persistent, while public health systems are stretched thin, battling outbreaks of dengue and other vector-borne diseases in flood-affected regions. In the meantime, Pakistan lags in human development, its passport ranks among the weakest globally, and all public institutions continue to underperform.

The argument that reform is urgent is hardly disputed by anyone, but the haste being shown demands that such acceleration be matched by prioritisation of the many ground-level crises, and not merely structural rearrangements at the very top.

Majid Burfat
Karachi

Non-toxic homes

A PEACEFUL home does not mean a quiet one; it means a non-toxic space where all family members, especially children, feel safe enough to express themselves without fear or judgment. True peace comes from open communication and emotional freedom, not from forced silence. Unfortunately, in many families, children who try to share their feelings are told to stay quiet or keep things private. This culture of silence, often reinforced by family beliefs and the idea that problems should remain behind closed doors, causes deep emotional harm. When children grow up unheard and suppressed, they carry insecurity and internalised stigma into adulthood. Parents must understand that home is the first and primary space to nurture the concept of emotional health.

A home where children can speak freely and be listened to, builds strength, trust and mental wellness of all. A peaceful home heals, while an abusive or silent one leads to emotional dysregulation and long-term psychological distress.

Hani Wahid Baloch
Karachi

▶ **THE ROAD AHEAD:** Zohran Kwame Mamdani made history recently with his election to the office of the mayor of New York City (NYC). With all that he had to face during his election campaign, it is clear that the journey ahead will not be an easy one, especially when it comes to his plans that have anything to do with Israel. NYC has an opportunity to take on a leading role in stopping Washington's endless wars. As demonstrations over the last couple of years have shown, Americans are sick of wars that have drained the national treasury, which, in turn, has hurt the cause of the common man. Many Muslims have won electoral battles before Mamdani, but they have failed to make a sustained impact on government policy. Let us hope Mamdani will be able to achieve what others could not.
Angabeen Ahmad
Karachi

▶ **INVESTOR CONFIDENCE:** When the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra) overturned its own tariff decision within a few months, it undermined the credibility of the entire regulatory framework. Investors plan long-term projects based on approved tariffs; they cannot operate under such uncertainty. This sudden reversal may cripple the company that powers factories. If K-Electric (KE) cannot sustain its operations or maintain its infrastructure, industrial output will suffer, jobs will be lost, and the national economic engine will slow down. Nepra must realise that policy instability is harmful for both the company and its customers.
Shamikh Janjua
Karachi

▶ **SUKKUR TEST CENTRE:** The recent decision of the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) to shift the examination centre from Sukkur to Pano Aqil has caused serious logistical and financial problems for most candidates. Such abrupt administrative changes ahead of highly demanding examinations, add psychological stress along with financial strain and travel fatigue. The FPSC should review its decision and restore the Sukkur centre to facilitate all candidates without any bias.
Nirmal Oad
Shikarpur

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